

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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March'22

No. 2060

## **A Special Message for Subscribers to the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition of The Great Books of the Western World**

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### I. WHAT MAKES THE GREAT BOOKS GREAT?

Great books, Mark Twain once said, are the books that everybody wants to have read. Everyone recognizes that these are the books that can furnish the enlightenment and entertainment so closely identified with an educated person. But having simply read them will not do. The person who understands what it means to become educated knows that the great books are better defined as the books everyone wants to reread, again and again, in the endless pursuit of the wisdom they contain.

“What makes great books great,” Robert M. Hutchins wrote in his Introduction to *Great Books of the Western World* twenty-five years ago, “is, among other things, that they teach you something every time you read them. Every time you read them, you see something you had not seen before; you understand something you had missed.” And, I would add, every time you read them, your enjoyment of them is enhanced, your appreciation of their unfathomable greatness is increased.

There are many explanations of the greatness of the great books but, in my judgment, the best—the one that goes directly to the heart of the matter—is their almost endless rereadability with both profit and pleasure.

## Fleeting literature—and the permanent sort

The German philosopher and essayist, Arthur Schopenhauer, made this pungent observation more than a hundred years ago: “Looking over a huge catalogue of new books,” he wrote, “one might weep at thinking that, when ten years have passed, not one of them will be heard of.” He then went on to say:

There are at all times two literatures in progress, running side by side, but little known to each other. The former grows into permanent literature, [the other kind] goes at a gallop, with much noise and shouting of partisans. Every twelve months it puts a thousand works on the market. But after a few years one asks, Where are they?

I can testify from my own personal experience that the great books are permanent literature, and only they are truly permanent. I have been reading the great books collected in this series for more than fifty years now. I started when I was in college at the beginning of this century, and since then I have been teaching them and leading discussions of them, both with students in school and with adults all over the United States. In the course of teaching them and discussing them with others, I have reread many of them many times—many times more than three or four rereadings—and every time my mind has been enriched and my delight has been rekindled.

### Pick 10 books to be marooned with

You can judge this for yourself by imagining your being cast off on a tropical island for ten years under the following conditions. You are provided with all the comforts and conveniences of life, including human companionship. You are under no obligation to work for your living. All your time is free—at your disposal to do with as you wish. You are deprived of entertainment by either radio or television, and you are not supplied with news or information of what is going on in the world beyond the island. To occupy some portion of the time you have left over from sleeping, eating, exercising, and engaging in conviviality with your human companions, you will wish to read some books. You are allowed only ten books for the ten-year period. Hence they must be books that deserve to be read slowly and carefully, to be savored page by page, as well as books that can be reread again and again in the course of ten years.

What ten books would you select for this purpose? If I were to add

one additional requirement—that the person choosing ten books for ten years of reading were to do so with the wish to leave the island at the end of that time with a mind that has been enriched and a personality that has been enlarged—then I have not the slightest doubt that the ten books anyone picked for that purpose would certainly be chosen from writings by the authors assembled in *Great Books of the Western World*.

## II. WHAT MAKES THEM GOOD BOOKS AS WELL AS GREAT

What has been said so far by no means suffices to convey all the attributes that make a great book great. Nor does it explain what makes them extraordinarily good books as well as great ones.

Compared with the most popular of the current best sellers, the great books, or most of them, have been more widely read. *Gone with the Wind*, for example, in spite of its vast popularity has had relatively few readers as compared with the plays of Shakespeare, *The Odyssey* of Homer, or *Gulliver's Travels*. It is reasonable to estimate, as a bibliophile recently did, that Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have been read by at least 25,000,000 people in the last 2,500 years.

The unfailing contemporaneity of the great books is the reason why I prefer not to speak of them as "classics." That word connotes something that belongs to the past—an archeological monument that we revere as part of our heritage, but may not regard as a vital ingredient of our contemporary lives. The great books are, of course, classics in that sense; they are the great cultural monuments of Western civilization. But they are not faded glories.

The great books are, in fact, the very best entertainment that is available to us, elevating as they entertain. And they are the most potent civilizing forces in the world today.

### The work of men of imagination

In addition to being always alive for you, not just dead monuments of the past, the great books are popular, not pedantic. In calling them "popular," I mean simply that they were written for people, not for professors. In fact, with the exception of a few of them written in the last 150 years, they were not written by professors. They were written by men of imagination, thought, and learning, to

contribute to the imagination, thought, and learning of other human beings.

Not only were they written for a popular audience, they were written for the uninitiated—not the specialist. In his Prologue to the *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that his purpose was to expound the truths of the Christian faith “in such a way as may tend to the instruction of beginners.” That is equally true of Plato’s intention in the writing of his dialogues, or of Machiavelli’s intention in the writing of *The Prince*. The reason why it is true of all the great books is that each of them is an original communication and so, with respect to what they communicate, all of us are necessarily beginners.

### Books about which countless books are written

It is almost unnecessary to add that the great books are the most influential books. In the tradition of literature and of learning, they have been most discussed by readers who are also writers. They are the books about which countless other books have been written. They are also the most imitated books, for each of them in its own way is a model for others to follow. Imitated they can be, but equaled or excelled never, for each of the great books is a book that cannot be duplicated. It is a book that accomplishes, once and for all, what it sets out to do.

Finally, let me add that the appeal of the great books is universal—not only to the diversity of human temperaments and intellectual bents, but also to human beings of all ages and at all stages of human life. The reason is that they deal with the universal themes that always occupy the minds of reflective human beings; they touch on the pervasive emotional and personal problems that always perplex the hearts of sensitive men and women.

### III. THE GREAT BOOKS MOVEMENT IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

The publication by The Franklin Library of this special anniversary edition of *Great Books of the Western World* not only celebrates that anniversary in a splendid and appropriate fashion; it also marks for me the culmination of over fifty years of involvement in the great books movement in American education—as a student, as a teacher, as an author, and as an editor.

As an undergraduate student at Columbia University in the early twenties, I had the good fortune to take part in the educational

program initiated by Professor John Erskine in 1921. He had proposed to the faculty that a selected group of students be invited to read and discuss with him the great books of Western civilization. His aim, as he described it in his autobiography, was to have the students—

read the great books, the best sellers of all times, *as* spontaneously and humanly as they would read current best sellers; and having read the books, [I] wanted them to form their opinions at once in a free-for-all discussion. It would take two years of Wednesday evenings to discuss all the books on my list.

Taking that course—reading one of the great books each week and discussing it in a two-hour seminar under the leadership of Professor Erskine—I began my own liberal education. Compared to what happened to my mind in those two years with Erskine, all the rest of my schooling pales into insignificance. The information and knowledge that I acquired in other courses did not always remain in my memory, but the ideas that I began to understand through reading and discussing the great books are fixed in my mind—and that understanding has grown ever since, as I have reread the great books year after year.

My good fortune in being a student of Erskine's in that initial educational experiment was followed by my even greater good fortune in being invited by Erskine to teach the great books at Columbia after I graduated from college. I conducted great books seminars at Columbia with Mark Van Doren as my colleague, from 1923 to 1929.

What I learned from that experience was for me even more important than what I learned as a student. I thought I had understood the great books when I read them as a young student, less than twenty years old. I discovered, when I returned to them as a teacher, that I had barely scratched their surface.

### A rite of initiation

Looking back on my own development, I realized that as I myself grew older, as I became more mature with added years of experience, my reading of the great books became more and more rewarding. The great books cannot be fully fathomed by the young. But they should be read by the young as a rite of initiation into the world of the mind—the world of the great ideas. After all, the earlier a first reading of the great books occurs, a reading in which

one acquires what is at best a superficial acquaintance with their content, the sooner one is prepared for a life-long study of them.

This led me, in later years, to formulate two basic proposals for the reform of American education. The first was that the reading of the great books should be the heart of the curriculum in every college that is committed to the general, liberal, and humanistic schooling of the young. The second was that liberal and humanistic education thus begun in college cannot and should not stop there, but must be followed up by continual recourse to the great books in adult life.

### A project for a lifetime

Since there is no point at which anyone can *fully* master the great books, plumb them to their depths, or exhaust the riches they contain, reading the great books is an educational project that can justifiably occupy the whole of one's lifetime. The slow and steady pursuit of understanding and wisdom, which should be everyone's educational goal, cannot be accomplished in any other way, or in much less time than that. If the ideal of an educated human being is a man or woman who has achieved in the course of a lifetime a modicum of understanding and wisdom, it should be obvious at once that no amount of schooling, no matter how good it is, can produce a completely educated person.

The opportunity for applying another of my educational proposals occurred a few years later. In 1929, Robert M. Hutchins, a Yale graduate and then Dean of the Yale Law School, became, at the age of 30, President of the University of Chicago. We had become acquainted through working together on some joint projects in the Yale and Columbia Law Schools. After he became President of the University of Chicago, he asked me about my educational theories, confessing that his own undergraduate education at Yale had not prepared him for his new post or for the educational leadership that he now felt it his duty to assume. I told him that reading the great books was the only thing that really mattered in my own education so far. He invited me to join him at the University of Chicago and to start a great books program there.

### “Contemporary in every age”

Beginning in 1930 with a group of entering freshmen, Mr. Hutchins and I conducted great books seminars year after year, adopting the original Erskine list with certain changes that had been introduced in the preceding ten years at Columbia. In 1936, Hutchins published his Storrs Lectures at Yale, under the title *The*

*Higher Learning in America.* He called for a basic reform of the curriculum of our liberal arts colleges by making the reading of the great books and the discussion of the great ideas pivotal and central to the course of study:

A classic is a book that is contemporary in every age. That is why it is a classic. The conversations of Socrates raised questions that are as urgent today as they were when Plato wrote. In fact they are more so. Such books are then a part, and a large part, of permanent studies.

They are so in the first place because they are the best books we know. How can we call a man educated who has never read any of the great books of the Western World? Yet today [and this was in 1936] it is entirely possible for a student to graduate from the finest American college without having read any of them, except possibly Shakespeare....

In the second place these books are an essential part of general education, because it is impossible to understand any subject or to understand the contemporary world without them.

### An unfinished schooling

The great books educational program was subsequently developed at St. John's College in Annapolis and at Notre Dame University as well as at the University of Chicago. We also made the great books into a continuing program of adult education. This began with the formation in Chicago of a great books seminar that Mr. Hutchins and I conducted for leaders in the world of business, industry, and the learned professions, many of them Trustees of the University of Chicago. That seminar, started in 1943, is still in operation, though many of its original members, including Mr. Hutchins, are no longer alive. I am still conducting it.

The Great Books reading groups for adults, fostered by the Great Books Foundation, have enrolled, in the course of the last thirty years, thousands upon thousands of men and women from all walks of life who realized that their schooling did not complete their education and that they had the responsibility to do what was necessary to keep their minds alive and growing if they were to become educated persons with some approach to the acquirement of wisdom through an understanding of the great ideas.

### Getting a liberal education

Having told, in brief summary, enough of the story of the great books movement (as initiating a basic reform in our educational institutions and as a program of continuing liberal education in adult life), I turn now to what is the climax of the story—the publication, in 1952, by Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. of *Great Books of the Western World*, of which Robert Hutchins was Editor-in-Chief and I its Associate Editor.

#### IV. THE FIRST PUBLICATION OF *GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD*

The year 1952 marked the first publication of *Great Books of the Western World*, an event celebrated at a banquet at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City, to which were invited the 600 patrons whose subscriptions underwrote the initial printing of this set of books. But the work that had to be done to prepare the set for publication began in 1943.

The selection of the authors and titles to be included, the editing of the volumes (which contained more than 25,000,000 words), the devising of the typographical design, the preparation of diagrams and maps, and above all the construction of the extraordinary adjunct to the set, entitled *The Great Ideas, a Syntopicon* (which the *New York Times* described, at the time of publication, as “an orderly means of access to the contents” of the great books)—all this took eight years of work, involving more than three score of scholars in this country and abroad and costing more than two million dollars before the presses began to turn in 1950.

#### With the advice of noted scholars

The editorial work was done mainly on the campus of the University of Chicago and under its auspices. It was therefore appropriate for the published volumes to bear the seal of the University as well as that of the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company. However, the Advisory Board of Editors and the Editorial Consultants, who spent more than two years in deliberating about the authors and titles to be included in the set, consisted of scholars at other universities in this country and abroad, all chosen for their acknowledged devotion to liberal education and to the great books as the substance of such education.

#### Eschewing the short cuts to a liberal education

Our deliberations were guided by two controlling principles laid

down by Mr. Hutchins at the outset. The first was that, wherever editorially possible, the works to be included should be whole works, and never excerpts from the great books. In the instances in which all of a particular work could not be published because of its length, our selection included the major parts of it that were themselves genuine artistic wholes.

The second guiding principle for the choice of authors and titles was their indispensability to anyone's liberal education through their discussion of the great ideas and their contribution to the great conversation about these ideas.

### The need for an early beginning

The idea of a "great conversation" across the ages, a conversation about the great ideas which are the indispensable implements of everyone's thinking about his own life and the world in which he lives, was originally proposed by Scott Buchanan, developed by Robert Hutchins, and adopted by all the members of the Advisory Board of Editors. In his own Introduction to the set Mr. Hutchins wrote:

We think the sooner the young are introduced to the Great Conversation the better. They will not be able to understand it very well; but they should be introduced to it in the hope that they will continue to take part in it and eventually understand it. But we confess that we have had principally in mind the needs of the adult population who, in America at least, have as a result of the changes of the last fifty years the leisure to become educated men and women. They now have the chance to understand them-selves through understanding their tradition.

He explained how the great books were selected:

The members [of the Advisory Board] drew upon their experience in teaching as a guide. . . . They would not be embarrassed at the suggestion that they had omitted a book, or several books, greater than any they had included, (the Bible for example, which was omitted on the reasonable assumption that it would be present in most American homes). They would be disturbed only if they thought they had omitted books essential to a liberal education or had included any that had little bearing upon it.

## A problem of perspective for the 20th century

As Editor-in-Chief and Chairman of the Editorial Board, Mr. Hutchins then reported that “the discussion of the Board revealed few differences of opinion about the overwhelming majority of the books in the set. The set is almost self-selected, in the sense that one book leads to another, amplifying, modifying, or contradicting it.”

From the 8th century B.C. to the 17th Century A.D., the judgment of the selection committee was unanimous. The nearer we approached our own century, lack of sufficient perspective made the choice of authors and titles more questionable. Our decision to stop with William James and Freud and with the close of the 19th century arose from our prudent respect for the difficulty of choosing 20th century works.

## An index of the great ideas to guide the reader

The idea of a great conversation about the great ideas to be found in the great books did more than control the selection of the authors and titles to be included in the set. It led to the construction of the *Syntopicon*, an invention of mine that I look back upon with pride, especially in the light of the help it has afforded its users during the last 25 years. If the great books contain an ongoing conversation about the great ideas, what the reader of the great books needs is a guide to the themes or topics discussed in that conversation, with reference to the passages in the great books in which that discussion takes place. That, in brief, was the germinating insight for the production of a systematic index to the discussion of the great ideas in the great books, called “a Syntopicon” because its plan for presenting that discussion called for a collection of topics, some 3,000 of them, organized under 102 great ideas.

One aim that the *Syntopicon* sought to achieve was enabling the reader of the great books to participate in the great conversation and to become a member of the community of free men, able to make up his own mind on the issues that confront all of us—not haphazardly, but with guidance from the accumulated wisdom of mankind.

That wisdom, however, is not a monolithic structure of orthodox beliefs. On the contrary, it includes the widest diversity of opinion on every subject about which reason-able men can disagree. It is precisely the heterodoxy—the disagreements and the controversies

that prevail in the great conversation—which solicits the reader of the great books, with the help of the *Syntopicon*, to make up his own mind.

As Mr. Hutchins pointed out:

In a conversation that has gone on for twenty-five centuries, all dogmas and points of view appear. Here are the great errors as well as the great truths. The reader has to determine which are the errors and which are the truths. The task of interpretation and conclusion is his. This is the machinery and life of the Western tradition in the hands of free men.

## V. HOW MANY AND HOW VARIOUS ARE THE GREAT BOOKS?

The enumeration and listing of the great books is as old as reading and writing. The teachers and librarians of antiquity did it. It was done again and again in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Montaigne in his essays and John Stuart Mill in his *Autobiography* drew up lists of great books—the books that most influenced the development of their minds and spirits.

*Great Books of the Western World* in its handsome 25th Anniversary Edition consists of 96 volumes. A volume which contains Shakespeare's plays, or Montaigne's essays, or Plato's dialogues, may contain anywhere from a dozen to a score or more. Yet each play, each essay, each dialogue, is by itself a great work—a work of art. The volume is merely the physical container of these works; it itself is not a great book, but a repository of great books.

It is often erroneously supposed that the great books are mainly works of "literature" in a too narrow sense of that term: in other words, restricted to the great imaginative works of poetry and of fiction—great epic and dramatic poetry, the great novels and plays, and even great essays. Yet the proper conception of great literature is much broader than that. It includes *all* writing of profound and lasting humanistic significance.

By this criterion, the great books include writings in the fields of science, philosophy, and theology as well as great poetry; the great histories and biographies as well as the great plays and novels.

## VI WHY THE GREAT BOOKS ARE IMPORTANT

## FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Liberal education—the education that liberates the human mind from prejudice and provincialism—is education for freedom. If human beings are to be free, their minds must be free. The great books are, first and last, the instrument of the liberal self-education for those who have had enough experience of life to be daily confronted by the problems with which the books deal.

People who have all the opportunities for freedom can, nevertheless, live like slaves. They can fail to think for themselves about the problems that affect their lives and their society. They can spend the greater part of their energies in obtaining the comforts and conveniences of life, and what is left of their lives they can fritter away in amusements which do little more for them than kill the time that hangs heavy on their hands.

### A free life—and how best to enjoy it

The mark of the free life is that one day is not like another. Each year does not differ from its predecessor merely in the quantity of consumable goods or in the variety of pleasurable pastimes. The free life is one of continual growth, in which the individual marks the passage of time by the stages of his own development. The goods that person accumulates are the goods of leisure. They are not consumable from day to day, but are lasting acquisitions and enrichments. Such gains as knowledge and insight, understanding and wisdom, endure through a lifetime. They are as enduring as the great books, which are the means of acquiring them.

Given the opportunity for a free life, the responsibility of using it to his or her own lasting profit ultimately falls upon each man or woman who is blessed with freedom. We forfeit our freedom if we rely on someone else to exercise it for us.

The whole purpose of liberal education, in which reading the great books occupies a central and pivotal place, is to enable free human beings to make good use of their freedom—the use of time that is free for leisure and learning, for personal growth, and for all the things that constitute living well, over and above earning a living.

### The threat to democracy

Without a liberally educated people, democracy must degenerate into a mockery of itself. “The democratic enterprise,” Robert Hutchins has said, “is imperiled if any one of us says ‘I do not

have to try to think for myself, or make the most of myself, or become a citizen of the world republic of learning.' The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment."

And in another place, Mr. Hutchins wrote:

... the reduction of the citizen to an object of propaganda, private or public, is one of the greatest dangers of democracy. A prevalent notion is that the great mass of the people cannot understand and cannot form an independent judgment upon any matter. . . . The reiteration of slogans, the distortion of the news, the great storm of propaganda that beats upon the citizen twenty-four hours a day all his life long mean either that democracy will fall prey to the loudest and most persistent propagandist or that the people must save themselves by strengthening their minds so that they can appraise the issues for themselves.

Great books alone will not do the trick; for the people must have the information on which to base a judgment as well as the ability to make one. . . . But they can help us to that grasp of history, politics, morals, and economics and to that habit of mind which are needed to form a valid judgment on the issue. Great books may even help us to know what information we should demand.

It is here that the great books are so much better than all others. They raise the fundamental questions about man and his world, and they propound the fundamental answers. That is why the great books can help to make our experience more intelligible to us. They are the books we must read to make the most out of our experience and out of all the other things we read or hear or see. They illuminate whatever else we read. They enable us to examine whatever else we learn with a critical and questioning mind, without which we can make little sense of all the information and experience that we accumulate from day to day.

### Parents to look up to

I would like to add one thing more. To the extent that the great books help human beings to think more intelligently and to communicate more intelligibly, they enrich all forms of human association, but in the case of the family, they can perform a very special function. The circumstances of modern life have greatly

weakened the vitality of the home, and particularly the position of parents in relation to their children. They are often no longer the symbols of knowledge and wisdom, the sources of guidance and counsel. Parents exercise less and less authority, and receive less and less respect.

The only authority parents should have is, of course, an authority based upon experience and wisdom. Only such things deserve respect, not age or sheer physical power.

Because they are more mature, parents can understand the great books better than their children. The wisdom that the great books contain is more accessible to them than to the young. If they take advantage of this fact, parents may symbolize for their children the accumulated wisdom of the race, to which every generation of human beings must eventually repair.

## VII. THE SYNTOPICON: 102 GREAT IDEAS

Permit me to repeat something said earlier. *Great Books of the Western World* is more than a large number of individually great works of the human mind, covering all the major fields of learning and literature. Each great work—in history, mathematics, science, law, politics, economics, philosophy, theology, poetry, and fiction—can stand alone because of its originality, its universality, and its artistic excellence. But the great books are greatest when they are performing together.

That is what the *Syntopicon* does for them. It brings their authors together in a great conversation across the ages—talking to one another on 3,000 themes or topics, organized under 102 great ideas. In addition, the *Syntopicon* makes it possible to *read in* the great books as well as to *read through* them. It converts the set into a reference library, as indispensable for the understanding of ideas as the dictionary is for discovering the meaning of words or the encyclopedia for acquiring information about matters of fact.

Mr. Hutchins in his Introduction to the set described the *Syntopicon* as “a summation of the issues around which the Great Conversation has revolved, together with indications of the course of the debate at this moment.” And he went on to say:

... the *Syntopicon* argues no case and presents no point of view. It will not interpret any book to the reader; it will not tell him which author is right and which is wrong on any question.... It shows him how to find out what great men

have had to say about the greatest issues and what is being said about these issues today.... It indicates where we are: where the agreements and the disagreements lie: where the problems are; where the work has to be done....

“What do the great minds have to say?”

How does the *Syntopicon* work? How would you put it to use? That will be explained in the Preface to the *Syntopicon*, which will guide you in making good use of it. Here let me give you some notion of the structure of the *Syntopicon* and of the magnitude of the effort involved in producing it.

Imagine yourself with all the great books on the shelves of your library, but without the *Syntopicon* as an adjunct to them. Then imagine yourself asking, as you quite naturally might, what do the greatest minds of Western civilization have to say about—

divorce  
equality between the sexes  
capital punishment  
the causes of war  
the desirability of honor  
the kinds of love  
the relation of parents to children  
the immortality of the soul  
the existence of God

A labor of 400,000 scholarly man hours

These are only a few of the 3,000 topics on which the *Syntopicon* gives you an orderly list of references to the great books—to the precise passages in them in which a given topic is discussed from a variety of points of view. Without the *Syntopicon* at your disposal, you would often have to read through every one of the great books to dis-cover what they have to say on one particular topic. That would require reading through them 3,000 times to ferret out the wisdom they contain on *all* the major themes of human interest and importance.

No one could do that in a lifetime. It took a large staff of highly skilled readers, working under my supervision, over 400,000 man hours of reading to assemble the 163,000 references to the great books that record what they have to say about the 3,000 topics set forth in the *Syntopicon*.

The *Syntopicon* is divided into 102 chapters, each one on a great idea, ideas such as Art, Beauty, Constitution, Courage, Democracy, Emotion, Family, Government, Happiness, Honor, Justice, Labor, Law, Liberty, Love, Man, Mind, Nature, Pleasure and Pain, Progress, Revolution, Sin, Slavery, State, Truth, War and Peace, Wealth, World, to name only a few of them.

Each of these 102 ideas is a world in itself—a world to be explored, in itself and in relation to other ideas.

Every great idea alters and grows. Having a life, it can have a history—a past, present, and future. Each of the great ideas is a complex and organic whole, a dissectible structure of related parts. Ideas may look alike from the outside, but the more we look into them, the more we find that each is a world of its own, with its own special history and its own special structure. Yet each also belongs to the vaster world or universe of thought in which the great ideas group themselves to form constellations or galaxies.

### Matching wits with the greatest minds

What I have just said about the great ideas explains the five parts that comprise each of the 102 chapters of the *Syntopicon*. Each begins with a highly readable essay about the history of the idea and the development of the controversies about it. That is followed by an outline of the themes or topics around which the discussion of the idea has revolved in the last 2,500 years. Then, topic by topic, references are given to the passages in the great books in which that topic is discussed. Next, the various relationships between this idea and other great ideas are indicated.

*Great Books of the Western World*, by itself and without the *Syntopicon*, is an inestimable treasure—a collection of the most enjoyable, the most interesting, the most instructive, the most illuminating books ever written, representing the accumulated wisdom of man. But with the *Syntopicon* added to the series of great books, the collection becomes transformed into a reference library of incomparable utility—a reference library that is easy and enjoyable to use, giving you the delights of discovery as well as the stimulation derived from matching wits with the greatest minds of all time.

Imagine the 74 authors of *Great Books of the Western World* all in the same room discussing any one of the 3,000 topics that fall under the 102 great ideas. Imagine yourself being able to listen in on that conversation. That is precisely what the *Syntopicon* enables

you to do. And after you have listened in and heard what the great authors have said on this subject, it is your turn to have your say—to make up your mind about it.

You can now see why the editors of the original edition of *Great Books of the Western World* regarded the *Syntopicon* as an integral part of that set of books. I am delighted to say that the editors of The Franklin Library take the same view of the matter. For them, as for Mr. Hutchins and me, the *Syntopicon* is not only an indispensable instrument but also an essential ingredient. It is the arch stone that enables the whole series to stand as a unified whole.

### VIII. THE FRANKLIN LIBRARY'S 25th ANNIVERSARY EDITION OF GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD

Twenty-five years ago, at a dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City, when *Great Books of the Western World* was presented to its sponsoring subscribers and patrons, Robert Hutchins, addressing the assemblage, said:

This is more than *a* set of books, and more than a liberal education. *Great Books of the Western World* is an act of piety. Here are the sources of our being. Here is our heritage. This is the West. This is its meaning for mankind.

... This act of piety is not merely a pious gesture. These books are not a monument. They are meant to be read. They are intended as the basis for the continuation in the present and future of the dialogue that they contain. They imply a rededication to the values for which they stand.

Twenty-five years later, The Franklin Library is reenacting that act of piety by publishing a new edition of *Great Books of the Western World* to celebrate its silver anniversary.

The celebration itself is golden, for The Franklin Library's publication of these books in 96 instead of 54 volumes, each magnificently bound, tastefully illustrated and designed, renders each volume a thing of beauty as well as of truth and goodness. Reasons of economy 25 years ago required us to use relatively small type in order to get 25,000,000 words into 54 volumes. The Franklin Library has spared no costs to ensure that the legibility of the great books equals and enhances their readability.

In arranging with Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. for the right to

issue this special anniversary edition, The Franklin Library agreed to publish the set essentially intact and unchanged. As Chairman of Britannica's Board of Editors. I would not have been willing to authorize this republication under any other conditions.

### With the benefit of 25 years of experience

Some changes have been made, on which I have been consulted and to which I have gladly given my approval. In some cases, better translations, now available, have been substituted for those originally used. While many of the excellent diagrams drawn for the original edition have been retained, new ones have been devised. Wherever possible, The Franklin Library has enhanced the volumes with beautiful illustrations that were lacking in the original.

From my point of view, the most important change has been the adoption by The Franklin Library of suggestions I have made for the improvement of the *Syntopicon*—to make it even more useful than it was in its original form.

All these changes enhance, but do not alter, any essential component or aspect of *Great Books of the Western World*. Nothing alien has been added; nothing essential has been dropped. It, therefore, gives me immeasurable pleasure to contemplate the issuance of *Great Books of the Western World* in this new format, for I regard it as a fitting culmination of a lifetime devoted to reading, teaching, and editing these books.

## IX. A POSSESSION FOR A LIFETIME AND AN INHERITANCE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Why is a lifetime needed for learning? Because the purpose of learning is growth, and our minds, unlike our bodies, can continue to grow as long as we live. We do not expect our bodies to stay alive and healthy without the daily sustenance of food and the continual invigoration of exercise. Why should we expect our minds to stay alive and vigorous without regular sustenance and exercise? Last year's or even last week's feeding will not suffice the body. Past reading and thinking will not suffice the mind either. Without exercise, the mind, no less readily than a muscle, atrophies. Without the sustenance it draws from ideas, the mind shrinks and withers.

To say that the great books and the great ideas are the prime sources of a liberal education is to say that they have the power to

provide the sustenance and the exercise the human needs for a lifetime of growth. Their power is inexhaustible. That is the essence of their greatness.

The greatest mistake anyone can make about liberal education is to suppose that it can be acquired, *once and for all*, in the course of one's youth and by passing through school and college.

If the high school or college graduate does not go on learning after school and out of school, by himself through reading and with his fellow-men through discussion, then he might just as well not have gone through school at all. His liberal schooling is a wasted effort if the preparation for a lifetime of learning does not bear fruit.

### A valued inheritance

The great books in the extraordinary format given them by The Franklin Library are more than a possession that anyone should cherish for a lifetime. They are an inheritance that anyone would wish to pass on to future generations. Ordinary books come and go; we acquire them and part with them. But it is unthinkable that anyone who acquired great books in this format that matches their contents in permanence of value would ever wish to part with them, except to hand them on to heirs of one's estate.

Book collectors traditionally seek out precious rarities—a first edition, an original manuscript, a special printing, of which only one or a few copies exist. The subscriber to The Franklin Library's special anniversary edition of *Great Books of the Western World* is a collector of something equally precious, though perhaps not equally rare, yet something that should be preserved for future generations as rare books deserve to be.

I cannot refrain from adding that, in my judgment, to acquire the most valuable collection, you should assemble the collection as a whole.

I congratulate the subscriber who has the foresight to acquire this extraordinary collection. He does not need praise from me. He honors himself by honoring its integrity 

Mortimer J. Adler, November 1977.

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## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and President

Roberta Friedman, Research Assistant

312-943-1076 312-280-1011 (cell)

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